

# Belgium: Land Split By Language, Custom

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For its 133 years as an independent nation Belgium has been a land divided against itself by languages and custom.

Periodically this division has flared into bitter and some-times violent disputes, as it did again in May in angry student demonstrations in the university city of Louvain.

Belgium's Flemings, who speak Flemish Dutch, are with increasing fervor demanding full equality with the Walloons, whose language is a French dialect.

Historically the French-speaking South, or Wallonia, has had the upper hand in Belgium. The peasant Flemings of Flanders in the north have held the role of second class citizens.

## Economy Bustling

The present generation of Flemings is unwilling to accept the underdog status of their fathers. The Flemings are being helped by a superiority in numbers and the bustling economy of Flanders compared to a declining birthrate of the French-speaking Walloons and faltering industry in- Wallonia.

The Fleming will no longer accept the historical French assertion that the Flemish language is inferior, with the implication that the Fleming himself is inferior.

Over the years the Flemings have won the same legal rights as the Walloons. Like American civil rights workers they are now seeing to it these laws are enforced. But extremists often worsen their respective causes.

The rivalry is as old as Belgium. When the country won independence from Holland in 1830 French was the language of the court, aristocracy, administration and the army, and Flemish of the northern peasants.

## Innocent Men Died In 1860

Two Flemish peasants were beheaded for, murder on judgment. The men pleaded their innocence in a French court but nobody could or would understand them. Subsequently the real killers. were found.

The angry protests which followed marked the beginning of overt Flemish discontent. But it took nine years for the Flemish language to be allowed in a courtroom.

World War I boosted the Flemish movement. The soldiers were mostly Flemish but the officers French-speaking.

A stone near the bloody battle-fields of Flanders proclaims: "Here is our blood--where are our rights?"

Between the wars laws were enacted giving the Flemings some of these rights. Higher education in Flemish was introduced. In 1930 an all-Flemish university was created in Ghent. About the same time Louvain Catholic University, although - deep in Flemish territory, for the first time introduced Flemish courses and degrees. Now graduates are reaching administrative, business and educational posts.

## Walloons Resentful

World War II caused a deep rift. In 1941 the Germans released most Flemish prisoners, calling them "our Germanic cousins." The Walloon prisoners were mostly sent to Germany and spent four years in captivity. Their resentment was directed against the Flemings as well as the Germans. In 1962 a language frontier was agreed on North of the line which divides the country Flemish is the official language. South of the line French prevails.

Smack in the middle of Flemish territory lies bilingual Brussels. Everything down to street signs must be, in both languages. Residents use either or both languages.

The Flemings number over five million compared to three million Walloons and just over one million bilingual Brusselers.

## Possible solution

Perhaps the glimmerings of a solution are seen in a move to decentralize the administration. More regional authority would reduce Brussels' importance.

But federation might blow the country apart with extremists seeking secession.

The cost of the rivalry to the nation is enormous. All administration has to be carried out in both languages. Millions are spent on translation and interpretation. There are two radio and two television networks. The division permeates all aspects of national life.

A solution is earnestly wished by most Belgians. When popular cyclist Eddy Merckx was asked by a foreign radio reporter "are- you French or Flemish?" he replied, "Neither. I am a Belgian." This so impressed everybody that premier Paul Vanden Boeynants sent Merckx a telegram of congratulations.